

**English 458:
Writing the Lyric Essay
MWF: 3:30-4:50
5 credits**

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Office: Hum 303, 650-3242
Office Hours: MW 1:30-3:00 and by appt.

*“Prose genres have been blurred all along.....
The essay is, and has been, all over the map. There’s nothing you
cannot do with it; no subject matter is forbidden, no structure is
proscribed. You get to make up your own structure every time, a
structure that arises from the materials and best contains them.”
—Annie Dillard*

There’s a lot of buzz these days about the “lyric essay.” *Seneca Review* devoted its 30th Anniversary issue to this kind of nonfiction writing; the editors define the lyric essay as a form that “partakes of the poem in its density and shapeliness, its distillation of ideas and musicality of language. It partakes of the essay in its weight, in its overt desire to engage with facts, melding its allegiance to the actual with its passion for imaginative forms.” In other words, the lyric essay refuses precise categorization but rather relies on a spirit of *playfulness* that allows it to straddle many different literary borders. In this course, we will seek to create our own definitions of the lyric essay by reading various writers in the form, modeling our own writing efforts on their essays, and creating multi-media projects that encourage experimentation.

Please consider this class a course in contemporary literature, approached from a creative writer’s perspective. In order to learn a form, you must read widely in that form, to get a sense for at least some of its various possibilities. You will be reading quite a bit of challenging work, essays that work in ways with which you may not be familiar. You will be asked to respond to this work courageously and astutely, using not only your intelligence but your intuition. You will also write work that challenges your own preconceptions of prose. To be successful, approach this course with a spirit of inquiry, playfulness, and a little bit of awe....

Texts: *Halls of Fame*, John D’Agata
Many Circles, Albert Goldbarth
For the Time Being, Annie Dillard
A Postcard Memoir, Lawrence Sutin
Custom Course Reader in the Lyric Essay

Prerequisites:

I expect that you have at least taken English 354 and so have written some creative nonfiction in the past. The first class assignment will require your willingness to go back to some old work of your own and radically revise.

Writing Assignments (I will give more details on each assignment as the course progresses)

1. A “**Braided Essay**”: *Draft due, 10/16; Revised version Due, 10/25*
2. A “**Hermit Crab Essay**”: *Draft due, 11/6; Revised version Due, 11/13*
3. A **Multimedia Project**: *Due as a presentation the last week of classes.*
4. A further revision of either the Braided Essay or Hermit Crab Essay, along with a 2-3 page “**final exam**” that analyzes the lyric form: *Due Wednesday, December 13 by 5:00 p.m. (Exam Week)*

Other Assignments:

—You must attend at least cultural events in the course of the quarter and write a creative response to that event in your writing journal. These events can include, but are not limited to: readings, art exhibits, musical performances, dance performances, public lectures, documentary films, etc.

—Reading and Writing Journals. See handout for more details.

—Student Presentations. You and a partner will be responsible for leading one class discussion during the quarter. See handout for more details.

Grading: Grades will be based on the quality of your revised work, your active participation, and your timely completion of all assignments.